# CREATING SOCIALIST WOMEN IN JAPAN

## Gender, Labour and Activism, 1900–1937

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# *Contents*

# *Illustrations*



**Figures**

CHAPTER 1

# *Introduction*

**The Socialist Future.** Cover of the socialist women's newspaper *Sekai Fujin* (*Women of the World*) No. 32, January 1909, illustrating the eclectic roots of Japanese socialism. Note the allegorical female figure, drawing on European conventions of socialist iconography, combined with banners bearing the Sino-Japanese characters for 'community' and 'freedom', a scene which is illuminated by the dawn of the socialist future.

In 1885, a young woman was imprisoned on charges of treason. She was one of a group of liberal activists who had planned to take explosives to Korea in support of the independence movement. While she was imprisoned, a fellow member of this movement wrote a pamphlet which eulogized her as a 'martyr to the liberal movement'.[1] It was not until the 1900s that she published her own account of her life, tracing her involvement in the liberal movement and her contact with the fledgling Japanese socialist movement in the early twentieth century.

The woman's name was Fukuda Hideko.[2] Her autobiography, *Warawa no Hanseigai* (*My Life so Far*), was published in 1904. A publisher's advertisement treated the book as a melodramatic account of an exciting life:

> The heroic woman Kageyama Hideko, who participated in the famous Osaka Incident with Ōi Kentarō and others, is the author of this book. How did she become renowned in her youth as a literary woman in her home town? How did she come to be involved in the Ōsaka treason trial? How did she spend her three years in prison? How did she part from her lover and come to know her husband? What kind of life did she lead as a wife in extreme poverty, as a loving mother in grief, and as a widow with many regrets? This book describes the vicissitudes and changes, the complications and entanglements of this great tragedy.[3]

However, I am interested in this book for other reasons. Fukuda's autobiography may be seen as an extended answer to the question of why a young woman from a low-ranking samurai family would rebel, become involved with the extremist elements of the liberal movement, and even after her release from imprisonment identify herself with the socialists – a group whose ideas were beyond the pale of acceptable political discourse in Meiji Japan. While Fukuda's autobiography explains the rebellion of one woman, in quite individualistic terms, the questions raised by her attempt to forge a political identity – to create herself as a socialist woman – are relevant to a succession of individuals and groups in early twentieth-century Japan. One woman's account of her development as an activist thus sets the scene for my discussion of the texts of a whole movement of socialist women, and provides a way of introducing the questions which shape this study.

*Warawa no Hanseigai* has been referred to as 'the first woman's autobiography' in modern Japan.[4] Although there is room for discussion about the definition of autobiography in early twentieth-century Japan, we can take the point that this was considered to be an important and distinctive text in 1904. Fukuda's writing style reveals her own classical education, and implies a highly literate readership.[5] Her acknowledged reference points, however, do not lie within the

Japanese literary heritage, which includes women's poetic diaries of the Heian period,[6] the autobiographies of such Meiji intellectuals as Fukuzawa Yukichi,[7] or the blurring of autobiography and fiction in modern Japanese novels.[8] Rather she refers to Benjamin Franklin's autobiography,[9] a translated biography of Joan of Arc,[10] and the Russian Nihilists.[11] Fukuda's autobiography may also be placed in the context of other genres of socialist writing. The publications of the early socialist group, the *Heiminsha* (Commoners' Society), with which Fukuda was acquainted by the time she wrote her autobiography, regularly published statements by socialists on their awakening to socialist ideals, under the generic title 'How I Became a Socialist'.[12]

After an introduction which explains her reasons for writing this autobiography, the narrative commences with an account of Fukuda as an exemplary student. Although she was praised by parents and educational authorities for her scholarly achievements, her classmates scorned her because of her tomboyishness. They called her *magai*, or *magaimono*, which has the meaning of 'fake' or 'artificial'. In this situation it refers to a woman pretending to be a man.

> On the way to school, I was always taunted by the naughty brats . . .! Only now can I see how appropriate their taunt was. I really was strange in those days. If we understand *magaimono* to mean something which appears to be what it is not – to make horses' hoof look like tortoiseshell, or to make the new 'rubber'[13] look like ivory – we can see how witty it was to call me by that name. Although it embarrasses me now, at that time I was known as a lively child. It goes without saying that I behaved like a tomboy in everyday life, and while studying I could not even spare the time to put my hair up. I liked reading books so much, that until the age of sixteen I wore my hair short and parted in the middle. Even my clothes were like boys' clothes . . .[14]

In her account of this incident, Fukuda presents the ambivalence of the young woman who found scholarship more important than the conventions of femininity. The autobiography displays a doubled perspective, with the mature author positioned at a distance from her younger self. In the passage quoted above, femininity is portrayed as something natural (but also beautiful and valuable?) through the metaphors of ivory and tortoiseshell. For a woman to appear mannish is fakery – like attempting to replace ivory and tortoiseshell with rubber or horse's hoof. Although the author now appears to identify with the children who are unsettled by the blurring of gender boundaries – 'someone who was not quite male and not quite female' – she also remembers the physical expression of her distress at the children's taunting – 'Whenever I look back on this, I can still feel my back soaked with sweat'.[15]

Further distancing from the young tomboy is achieved in a later passage, when the mature Fukuda is confronted with a young woman, dressed in masculine style, who has come to 'apprentice' herself to Fukuda. Fukuda, however, advises the young woman to wear more conventional dress, and relates the story of her subsequent marriage. This episode suggests that there were other women who shared her ambivalence concerning gender identity. Even before the publication of her autobiography, Fukuda was a well-known figure, because of her involvement in the Ōsaka Incident. Articles about Fukuda had appeared in newspapers, a biographical pamphlet had appeared in 1887, and Fukuda also describes visiting a theatrical performance in Okayama, which portrayed her participation in the Ōsaka Incident.[16]

Despite her ambivalence, Fukuda eventually conforms with the expectations placed on her, and submits to the disciplines of tea ceremony and flower arranging prescribed by her mother.

> Eventually, when I started to grow up, I became embarrassed to wear men's clothes, and it was in the summer of my seventeenth year that I started to grow my hair long, and started to wear my hair up like other women.[17]

Thus, *Warawa no Hanseigai* portrays one woman's ambivalence about accepted notions of gender identity, and how this ambivalence about femininity affected possible forms of political activity.

Fukuda also discusses more conventional political issues. She questions the repressive power of the Meiji State, which she has experienced at first hand, and comments in several places on the arbitrary nature of this power.[18] On the occasion of her release from prison (thanks to an amnesty in celebration of the promulgation of the Meiji Constitution), she comments wryly:

> So, the prison governor informed me that, thanks to the amnesty, my criminal record would be cleared, and I would be free from today. He gave the advice that I should, in future, devote myself even more wholeheartedly to the nation. On hearing this, a strange feeling came over me. Until yesterday – even until earlier today – I had been a traitor, but in the space of an hour I had been transformed into a patriot . . .[19]

Despite her ironic distancing from the concept of patriotism in this passage, until now she has used this concept as justification for her illegal activities. In several places she contrasts her own actions 'for the nation' with those who would act out of selfish or shallow motives.[20] Her criticism is directed both at government which is carried out for the benefit of a few individuals, and at some of her liberal comrades who would betray their cause for shallow motives. Like most other political thinkers of the Meiji period, Fukuda's political discourse is shaped by

nationalism, a value which was almost beyond criticism in Meiji Japan.

By the time of the publication of her autobiography, Fukuda identifies herself as a socialist. There is, however, no clear espousal of a socialist political strategy. Rather, the vocabulary and slogans of socialist rhetoric become apparent. In addition to complaints about the repressive power of the Meiji State, she now sees 'capitalists' and 'imperialists' as her enemies:

> Now I intend to oppose the monopoly of capital with all my might, and devote my attention to saving the unfortunate poor . . .[21]

> I was pleased to hear the ideas of the socialists, and eventually came to abhor the words of the imperialists who are bent on their own self interest and personal gain . . .[22]

In 1904, socialist thought was still in its earliest days in Japan, and socialist women had not yet articulated a clear philosophy. Some of the issues of concern to socialist women would later be addressed in the socialist women's paper, *Sekai Fujin* (*Women of the World*, 1907–1909), under Fukuda's editorship; and in other writings by socialist women. But the problem of how to be a woman, and a political activist, was to be addressed in various ways over the next few decades.

Fukuda came to political maturity at a time when discussion of liberalism was flourishing in Japanese society, and the development of capitalist relations was accompanied by the development of modern notions of individualism. Although the Meiji State failed to embrace liberal ideas in any real sense, the discourses of liberalism and individualism held resonance for the intellectuals of early twentieth-century Japan, and these ideas were reflected in the development of new genres of fiction, autobiography, and political writings. Autobiography is a genre which has been linked with modern notions of individualism in the European context, and it is perhaps unsurprising that we should see the development of this genre in Meiji Japan.[23] Fukuda's autobiography may be seen as an attempt to resolve the tension between becoming a woman and aspiring to a modern notion of selfhood which could include participation in public political activity, like many comparable European women's autobiographies.[24] However, such writing must also be understood as being shaped by specific discourses of nationalism and politics, and specific constructions of masculinity and femininity in the context of Meiji Japan. While men and women were addressed in gender-specific ways by nationalist discourse, many resisted their construction as 'imperial subjects', and attempted to explain their situation through the conceptual tools provided by liberal, socialist and feminist thought.

These gendered constructions of subjecthood are explored in more detail in Chapter two of this book.

Many activists attempted to find new ways of imagining relationships between individuals, and theorizing relationships between individuals and the State. In the early socialist movement of the 1900s, people eagerly read and discussed socialist and feminist ideas, and experimented with new forms of social relationships in their everyday lives. This is the milieu where Fukuda's autobiography was written, and her own account of her life reflects the early socialists' experimentation with lifestyles and political practices.

The members of the left-wing movement were intensely interested in the connections between personal relationships and political practices.[25] Fukuda's own life reflects the limitations of such experimentation. Many men and women in the socialist movement were unable to transcend implicit notions of gender identity, and women continued to be constructed as 'wives' and 'helpmates' within the socialist movement. This division of labour was also reflected in the area of political philosophy, with women being addressed in articles on free love, and on socialist forms of marriage and the family, while men were presumed to be interested in more narrowly theoretical discussions of the class struggle. The gendered forms of political participation and political thought in the early socialist movement will be explored in Chapter three.

Fukuda also attempts to come to terms with the experience of a sexed body, and to reconcile the contradictory identities of 'woman' and 'political activist'. Her account of her political development is punctuated by accounts of her first menstruation and other physical developments. She describes 'a certain physiological change', the late onset of menstruation, and links this with her ambivalent gender identity.[26]

In her account of this 'coming of age', Fukuda mixes these physical changes with an account of her tomboyish behaviour as a young woman: 'I was, from birth, rather unrefined like a man, and did not in the least possess any of the feminine graces'. The account of her physical maturation is followed by a discussion of the qualities of her 'ideal husband'. According to the structure of her autobiographical text, physical maturation prefigures an interest in matters romantic. This does not, however, eclipse her political ideals. She had thought that her ideal husband should be 'a great man, with a distinguished reputation', and had first become interested in her fiancé Kobayashi Kusuo, because of shared political ideals.[27] Later, in her account of 'becoming a mother', it is the physical manifestations of her condition that she initially dwells on, before recounting the difficulties of her relationship with her lover Ōi Kentarō.[28]

Fukuda's successors would attempt to bring together an interest in the specificities of women's experiences of the reproductive body, with discussions on the forms of social policy necessary to deal with women's reproductive capacity. A series of parallel, and often contradictory, discourses on motherhood from the 1910s and 1920s will be explored in Chapter four.

At the age of sixteen, when a marriage proposal is made to her family, Fukuda realises the economic vulnerability of women. On her refusal of this proposal her parents explain the state of the family finances to her, and thus the good economic reasons for going through with the marriage. In Fukuda's case, her education means that she can work as a teacher and contribute to the family budget, but this episode prompts Fukuda as narrator to reflect on the situation of women:

> Oh! I thought, how many women are there who, in this way, marry a husband for whom they feel no love, who simply marry ritualistically and mechanically, because of pressure from their families. From this time on, a wish was etched into my mind, the wish to find a way for such unhappy women to live in independence and autonomy.[29]

These thoughts, while attributed to the sixteen-year-old Hideko, are related by the mature narrator who has experienced the economic vulnerability of women. Fukuda bore Ōi Kentarō's son while living in a de facto relationship. She bore three more sons to her husband Fukuda Tomosaku, but was widowed while her children were young.

The young Fukuda is inspired by the message of feminist Kishida Toshiko, a member of the Freedom and Popular Rights Movement, who visits Fukuda's home town in Okayama, and gives speeches on women's rights. Kishida's visit is the impetus for the formation of a women's group which meets regularly, and gives the local women a monthly forum for discussing political issues.[30] Fukuda is shocked at the government's interference in a Liberal Party gathering, and the subsequent closing of her family's school. This is her first experience of government repression, and it is soon after the closure of the school that she decides to travel to Tokyo, to continue her studies and follow her political interests.[31]

The relationship between education, work, and women's independence is a recurrent theme in Fukuda's autobiography, as several other commentators have noted.[32] For Fukuda, work meant primarily intellectual labour as a teacher, writer, and editor, although she had experience of other kinds of work at different junctures in her life. In Tokyo, she survived for a time on the typically 'feminine' jobs of hairdressing, laundry and sewing, proclaiming that all kinds of work were equally sacred and honourable. While joining in preparation for

the Ōsaka Incident, she played the part of housewife in the comrades' household which was disguised as a students' boarding house. Her account of this time suggests she was relatively unused to such a role, although she takes credit for thinking of this way of camouflaging their activities. In prison, she joins in sewing with the other prisoners, but is also set apart from the other women in her role as teacher. In this environment, she comes into contact with women who have survived by begging and scavenging, and women for whom the threat of being sold into prostitution is a reality.[33]

While arguing for women's economic independence through productive labour, she speaks from the position of a relatively privileged intellectual. In her plans for teaching women self-sufficiency, she generally focuses on manual labour such as sewing or handcrafts, noting that, while there has been an expansion in education for women, existing forms of women's education generally fail to contribute to women's self-sufficiency. However, while arguing for a change in the economic determinants of relationships between men and women, her view of women's work is shaped by dominant constructions of class and gender in Meiji Japan. Her proposal is to teach women to produce embroidered silk handkerchiefs – a potential export product.[34]

In Fukuda's other relationships with women there is generally some class difference involved, with Fukuda cast as the benevolent provider of charity, knowledge, or educational assistance. An encounter with a female beggar is an opportunity to display Fukuda's benevolence and sensibility, but the beggar also serves as a mirror which reflects Fukuda's own feelings of loneliness and pathos, when she is left alone in an inn while her comrades visit tea houses, using money raised to support their mission:

> Once, when I was alone in the second-floor room of the inn and feeling depressed, I opened the sliding door and gazed down at a boat loaded with trash. On it was a beggar woman, with a child, two or three years old, strapped to her back. She was rummaging through the trash, picking out waste paper and putting it into her basket . . . I was overwhelmed at this sight and thought, 'Alas, I never realised how pitiful life could be. I am poor, but I am certainly better off than this beggar.'
>
> I was overcome with pity for the mother and child and called out to them from the second floor. Taking out a fifty-sen note, a small fortune for me then, I attached a weight to it and threw it down to the mother. She treated it as if it were a gift from heaven. She picked it up timidly, . . . as though she were afraid to take it, and I called out to her and told her to use it for the child . . .[35]

Even a professed socialist was likely to see class differences as 'natural'. While Fukuda feels solidarity with women from a similar class

background, in her relationship with the beggar, the barriers between women of different classes are preserved. These barriers are dramatized by the spatial distance between the two women, as the intellectual Fukuda looks down on the working-class woman from the second floor of the inn.

The innkeeper's comment on the suitability of contacts between the respectable lady and the beggar are presented without comment or disclaimer:

> The landlady stopped me and said, 'Was it you who gave some money to a beggar woman?' When I nodded, she said, 'A moment ago the woman with a child on her back came here with tears in her eyes, saying that a woman guest had thrown some money to her and she had come to thank her. She asked me for your name. I didn't think it was wise to let a beggar have your name, so I told her I would convey her message to you, and sent her off . . .'
>
> Charity rewards the giver, and not the receiver. I felt better then than I had for days. Then I forgot about the incident like a haze that passes before one's eyes. Only later – like a scene from a novel – would I again meet this beggar woman where I least expected to.[36]

In these scenes, Fukuda was grappling with the question of class consciousness. Intellectual women faced the question of how to bridge the gap between themselves and working women, and find ways of using their understanding of the mechanisms of class exploitation in order to work for social change. For working-class women, the question was how to forge solidarity when the conditions of work fostered fragmentation and alienation, while constructions of masculinity and femininity worked against the development of a common identity which could bring together working men and women. Questions of class consciousness and workers' identities will be explored in Chapter five, in the context of attempts to organize women workers in groups which addressed their demands to employers in the 1920s and 1930s. The consciousness of an identity as worker was often a necessary stage in socialist women's transformation into activists.

Throughout her autobiography, Fukuda is conscious of the tension involved in being a woman, but also trying to be politically active. She constantly refers to the fact that she is a woman:

> *Even I, a woman*, swore that I would not give up until I had found a way of getting rid of such bad government and evil laws.[37] [emphasis added]

After her arrest, she is sent to remand in Ōsaka, and is conscious that she is the focus of public attention because she is a woman:

> After interrogation by the police, I was to be sent to Osaka. At about eight or nine o'clock at night, we left the police station, tethered together.

> Although I may look like I could move briskly, with my woman's gait I tended to get left behind, and was dragged along on the rope until I somehow made it to the wharf, where we were transferred to the ship. Seeing that we were guarded by police, the other passengers stared at us as if thunderstruck, *but it was me – a woman – whom they stared at with rounded eyes . . .*[38] [emphasis added]

At other times it is the supposed weakness of the female body she refers to:

> *Even though I may have a weak body,* when it comes to patriotic fervour, I am second to no man.[39] [emphasis added]

Despite this protestation of physical weakness, however, she can assert women's moral superiority over men who frequent brothels in the midst of a political crisis.[40] This was one of the causes of her disillusion with her Liberal Party comrades, along with her dissatisfaction with the co-optation of many leading liberals by the Meiji government.

> Here I would like to make a confession. Not only do I deplore the arrogance of the nobility and the rich merchants, I also abhor the failures and the frivolity of the comrades in the Liberal Party, with whom I shared matters of life and death. *Even I, a woman,* would never as long as I lived, give up the idea that I was acting for the country, and it was this one idea which guided me.[41] [emphasis added]

For any activist in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Japan, there was the problem of the lack of suitable models for political activity, particularly oppositional political activity. This was true for both male and female activists. It might have been possible to search for models in the peasant rebellions which had erupted in the latter half of the Tokugawa period and the early Meiji period, for accounts of these rebellions were published in the 1880s. But such accounts provided few examples of heroic women. The women who appear in accounts of peasant rebellions are presented as grieving for lost relatives, or martyring themselves for particularistic family ties rather than acting for the sake of the community as their male counterparts were described as doing.[42]

The most vivid image of a political activist was the *shishi* – a member of the group of samurai who had overthrown the Shogunate and engineered the Restoration of the authority of the Emperor in the 1860s. Although male activists could identify with the bravery and resolution of the *shishi,* the connection with samurai values and the restoration of imperial authority meant that the *shishi* was an

ambiguous symbol for male socialist activists.[43] This was even truer for a woman activist of the time.

If Fukuda could not attain complete identification with masculine heroes, then another solution was to find a suitable female model. Although she refers to the intellectual influence of her liberal feminist predecessor Kishida Toshiko, it is the figure of Joan of Arc which is invoked regularly by Fukuda and other commentators. Joan of Arc was a suitably heroic woman, but also a suitably androgynous model for a young woman who had such difficulty in coming to terms with prescriptive notions of femininity.[44]

Fukuda's description of her own political activity and interests makes use of the language of bravery, resolution, and determination, but her identification with the *shishi* can never be complete. Although she refers to her younger self as a *jo-shishi* (female *shishi*), the adult Fukuda's use of this phrase is distanced from the feelings of the young patriot. Although the issue which prompts her political activity is the issue of Korean independence, her consciousness of injustice is also aroused by the lack of political rights for the majority of Japanese people, and the inequalities between men and women in Japanese society.[45]

However, although the adult Fukuda seems to have made some accommodation to the expectations of suitable feminine behaviour, she has not given up her resolve to participate in political activity. Her resolve to 'fight' for various causes is reiterated in several places, and she now has a clearer idea of the enemy she is fighting against:

> The [way I have travelled] has been one obstacle after another. I have always been fighting, and have never once been disheartened by setbacks. I have fought in the past; I am fighting in the present; and as long as blood flows in my veins, I intend to keep fighting. My vocation is in fighting, in the struggle against human inequity. On realizing that this is my vocation, I can bear the pain of recollection, and can even look back nostalgically at past sufferings.
>
> The only thing that will relieve the pain of past sufferings is further sufferings. According to my vocation, I will fight against my own sins and the sins of the world.
>
> In the past I became excited by the cries of those calling for popular rights and freedom, those who were enraged by the monopoly over political power. Now I intend to oppose the monopoly of capital with all my might, and devote my attention to saving the unfortunate poor . . .[46]

The text closes with a plan to educate women for self-sufficiency, an ending which may remind the reader of the opening descriptions of Fukuda's own education. We are introduced to Fukuda as a star pupil in the opening, and in the final pages we are told of Fukuda's plans to teach women useful crafts as a means to self-sufficiency. Although there

is no simple sense of narrative closure – we see Fukuda embarking on a new venture rather than showing a sense of arrival or completion – there is a sense of symmetry.[47]

In such texts as Fukuda's *Warawa no Hanseigai* we can see the beginnings of a tradition of feminist and socialist activism by women in Japan.[48] Fukuda had been inspired to participate in political activism by the speeches of her liberal predecessor, Kishida Toshiko, and later feminists were able to refer back to Fukuda's writings in their own attempts to construct a political subjectivity.[49] Chapter six focuses on the ways in which women came to construct themselves as activists, and from this position address their demands to the State. In framing strategies to address the State with their demands, activists also came to understand the militarist and imperialist nature of the Japanese State.

I have chosen to introduce this book with an analysis of Fukuda Hideko's autobiography for several reasons. Fukuda was writing at a time when socialist thought was first being articulated in Japan, and discussion of socialist understandings of the 'woman question' was just beginning. Thus, this is a useful entry point for discussion of the relationship between socialism and feminism in early twentieth-century Japan. Her account also traces her participation in the Movement for Freedom and Popular Rights (*Jiyū Minken Undō*), one of the intellectual precursors of Japanese socialism and feminism. In addition, the basic problematic of her text, how to resolve the disjunction between being a woman and aspiring to political activism, was a problem to be addressed implicitly and explicitly by other socialist women in early twentieth-century Japan. Fukuda's autobiography may be seen as a liberal gesture – displaying an implicit faith in individualism. Other writings of socialist women would grapple with similar issues, but would also attempt to address the question of class consciousness with varying degrees of success. Implicit in the writings of Fukuda and others is the search for a 'speaking position' from which to articulate a feminist consciousness. In order to explore this proposition, my narrative of socialist women's writings and activities will be organized around some of these possible 'speaking positions'.

According to the dominant discourses on women in Meiji Japan, women were positioned as imperial subjects, as wives, and as mothers. As I will discuss in Chapter two, women as imperial subjects were explicitly excluded from political participation. Some women, however, attempted to gain a voice by speaking as 'wives' or as 'mothers', as I discuss in Chapters three and four. However, the reality for most women was that they were engaged in various kinds of labour – domestic labour, agricultural labour, factory labour, or sexual labour.

Was it possible for women to speak as 'workers'? In Chapter five I will discuss the disjunction between being a 'woman' and being a 'worker', and the gendered construction of work and class consciousness. The tensions generated by the disjunctions between these positions led many women to political activism, and in Chapter six I discuss socialist women's attempts to engage with State institutions and to speak with a political voice as 'activists'. Finally, in Chapter seven, I close with some reflections on the process of imagining exploitation and liberation, repression and resistance, in socialist women's writings. But first it is necessary to make some further comments on the methodological and theoretical concerns of this study.

The socialist women's writings analysed in this book mainly come from the years 1900 to 1937, but in order to understand the context in which these women were writing, it is necessary to understand the political context of Meiji Japan, for the political institutions, conventions, and practices established in the first half of the Meiji period were to provide the context for political activity in Japan right up to the end of the Second World War. In the years from 1868 to 1898, Japan created all of the machinery of a modern nation-state – a Constitution, a new legal code and policing system, a system of compulsory education, capitalist industry, and an army and navy.

As part of this process, there was extensive discussion of the family, which was to form a crucial link in the chain of loyalty from subject to Emperor. Despite the diversity of marriage and inheritance practices prevalent in pre-Meiji Japan,[50] it was the most conservative form of patriarchal family based on primogeniture which was privileged in the Meiji Civil Code of 1898.[51] This (literally) patriarchal form of the family was dressed up in the ideology of 'good wives and wise mothers' which idealized women's contribution to the family.[52] While intellectuals discussed 'good wives and wise mothers', women came to comprise at least 60 per cent of the industrial labour force,[53] and other women were engaged in agricultural or domestic labour. The major export industries – silk, and later cotton – were dependent on the labour of young women from rural areas.

In Japan, as in many Western countries, economists and social scientists have tended to neglect the importance of women's labour in the early stages of industrialization. Japan's later expansion into heavy industry was largely based on capital built up in the first stages of light industry. Since the conditions of women's industrial labour were extremely exploitative, it is hardly surprising that spontaneous strike activity erupted as early as 1886. (The first textile mill had been established in 1872.[54]) This early strike activity was carried out by female textile workers, without the support of an organized union movement.